

House OKs bill to help veterans who have suffered sexual assault

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WASHINGTON — Veterans who suffered sexual assault or other sexual abuse while in uniform would get help more easily from the Department of Veterans Affairs under a bill approved Monday by the House.

The bill would allow a statement by a survivor of military sexual trauma to be considered sufficient proof that an assault occurred. The House approved the bill by voice vote Monday night.

The bill is named after Ruth Moore, a former Navy sailor who was raped twice by a superior officer almost three decades ago. Moore, of Milbridge, Maine, was awarded more than \$400,000 in retroactive disability benefits last year after a decades-long battle with the VA.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Chellie Pingree, D-Maine, called it an important step to get the VA to make its benefits process easier and fairer for veterans such as Moore who were sexually assaulted during their military service.

Since starting work on the issue five years ago, Pingree said she heard from "countless veterans who've struggled for years to get disability benefits for (post-traumatic stress disorder) and other conditions that stem from their assaults."

The survivors are men and women of all ages, from every branch of the service, Pingree said. "There are veterans who are suffering from PTSD because they were sexually assaulted, and they are not being treated fairly," she said.

Approval of the bill comes as the military struggles to combat sexual assault and members of Congress demand swift steps to protect whistle-blowers, including sexual assault victims who have faced retaliation from commanders or peers. Moore says her second rape occurred in retaliation for reporting the first rape.

Since the vast majority of sexual assaults in the military go unreported and even those that are reported are often not prosecuted, many survivors of military sexual trauma have found it hard to prove that an assault occurred.

Current VA policy allows statements from a mental health professional or even a family member to be considered as evidence of an assault, although critics say the VA has been inconsistent in applying that policy.

The Defense Department estimates that about 19,000 sexual assaults occurred in the military in 2010, but only 13.5 percent of those assaults were reported.

Although military sexual trauma is the leading cause of PTSD among female veterans, the VA rejected about two-thirds of sexual trauma claims, according to the Service Women's Action Network, an advocacy group.

Moore was raped twice while she was stationed in the Azores islands in the late 1980s. She said she was discharged on a false mental illness diagnosis and never received proper treatment from the military for the sexual assault.

Moore subsequently struggled with depression, anxiety disorders, homelessness and physical ailments tied to the incident, but was continually denied benefits.

After contacting Pingree's office in 2010, Moore told her story to a TV reporter on the condition that her identity be concealed. She went public in 2012 and later agreed to lend her name to Pingree's bill. The House approved the bill in 2013, but it was not taken up in the Senate.

An identical bill is sponsored in the Senate by Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont.

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